Berbers and Arabs in the Maghreb and Europe, medieval era

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Introduction

Migrations often accompanied Muslim invasions and expansions. They were a frequent phenomenon not only immediately after the conquest of new territories, but also as a consequence of many later military campaigns or other circumstances. Since details about long-term shifts in the centre of life of Arabs and Berbers in the surviving sources are rare, reliable information about the number, provenance, and duration of stay of new settlers in the Maghreb and parts of Europe during the Middle Ages is hard to find and difficult to estimate. This is aggravated by the fact that not every occupation of a region led to the establishment of a new leadership, which at least temporarily could create basic conditions for significant civilian settlement. In addition, the number of Muslim traders and slaves who stayed for longer periods in the occupied territories is completely uncertain. Therefore, this essay is focused on migrations of greater groups of Muslims, especially during the first phases of new dominations, and develops some major causes and consequences of these new settlements. In this context, the designations "Arab" and "Berber" are used for Muslims of different ethnic descent. But where this distinction cannot be made precisely, the general term "Muslim" is used, with the qualification that it always includes an unquantifiable number of non-Muslims, especially when talking about military forces. In all new territories ruled by Arabs and Berbers, non-converted Christian and Jewish populations fell under Muslim protection (*ḏimma*). With the *ǧizya* (a type of religious poll tax) they had to pay a higher tax burden than (converted) Muslims. The main medieval Arabic, Greek, and Latin sources concerning Muslims in the Maghreb and parts of Europe are collected in Amari (1933), Vasiliev (1935–68), Lévi-Provençal (1950–53), Talbi (1966), Laroui (1977), and Abun-Nasr (1987).

Maghreb

Berbers and Arabs in the Maghreb between opposition and integration (7th–9th centuries)

The Muslim conquest of the Maghreb (the westernmost region of North Africa, roughly corresponding to modern Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria) began in 647, when an Arab army gained control of the ancient Roman province of Africa, which the Arabs called Ifrīqiya (modern Tunisia). However, the region was permanently occupied only under the leadership of the general "Uqba ibn Nafi" (between 662 and 670). In 670, he founded the city of Qayrawān, destined to become the largest and most important Arabic metropolis in all the Maghreb. In this kind of settlement (*miṣr*) a rigorous division between conquerors and subjects was enforced in line with the patterns in use during the first phases of the Islamic conquests.

In the Umayyad period (661–750), the Maghreb remained under the direct control of the caliph of Damascus, but at the beginning of the Abbasid era, a sequence of centrifugal tendencies gave rise to various regional entities actually independent. These entities were ruled by dynasties of Arab descent and originated by distinguished families migrating to the West for political reasons or in search of fortune (Sufrits of Sigilmassa, Rustemids of the Central Maghreb, Idrissids of Morocco, Aghlabids of Ifrīqiya). Quite soon, it became evident that the real master of the Maghreb was whoever was able to control the army (*ǧund*), which was made up by soldiers coming from the Arabic

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peninsula (in particular from Southern Arabia), Syria, and Persia.

In spite of their very quick conquest of the region, the Arabs had to confront a violent Berber revolt led by the Kāhina (Arabic, "diviner," "priestess"), a local woman at the head of a coalition of Christian and Jewish tribes which was able to contest the Muslim forces for over a decade. Her death in 701 marked the end of the revolt as well as the beginning of the rapid Islamization of the Berbers of North Africa.

At first the Arabs maintained a very arrogant attitude towards the Berbers. The Berbers replied to this mistreatment with massive adherence to the Kharijite movement, equally hostile both to the Sunnis and to the Shiites. In the Maghreb, this movement manifested itself in the Ibadite version, where particular stress was laid on the ideals of equality and fraternity and on the claim of the same rights and duties for all Muslims, independent of their origin. The Ibadite missionaries of Arab origin often collaborated with the Berbers, and this Arab–Berber milieu was the starting point for the fusion of the two ethnic groups, a process beginning in the second half of the 8th century and continuing in the following centuries, if with some pauses and crises. A reflection of such a process is offered by the 10th-century tradition according to which two very important Berber tribes, the Ṣanhāǧa and the Kutāma, were of Arab origin. The Kharijite revolt covered the Maghreb with blood for a century, but as soon as the social reasons of discontent were removed, the Berbers revealed themselves as very eager to embrace the Islamic orthodoxy.

New migrations: from the Fatimids to the Banū Ḥilāl (10th–11th centuries)

Between the end of the 9th and the beginning of the 10th century, the Maghreb offered refuge to the leaders of a movement destined to change forever North Africa as well as Egypt: the Fatimid movement. Their preaching was very successful among the Kutāma Berbers because of their hostility towards the Arab-Sunnite establishment represented by the Aghlabids. In a short time the Fatimids conquered the urban center of Raqqāda and in 910 the *imām* 'Ubayd Allāh claimed to be the only legitimate Muslim caliph. After a defeated Berber revolt, the *imām* concentrated on the goals of his sect while he disdainfully turned down the Abbasid offer to replace the Aghlabids in the administration of those territories which had already been militarily conquered. In 912 the new capital al-Mahdiyya was founded and, beginning in 914–15, they attempted to conquer Egypt. This was finally accomplished in 969 and also led to the foundation of Cairo, which became the center of the new dynasty. After this great Egyptian success, the dynasty turned its attention on the reorganization of the army, seen as relying too much on the "Western" Berber element, which was therefore implemented through massive enrollments of "Oriental" (Daylamit and Turk), "Southern" (Nubian), and "Northern" (Greek, Italian, and Slav) soldiers.

The Sunni reaction was immediate: the Zirite Berber dynasty, which was at that time ruling over Tunisia and parts of Algeria, ordered a general massacre of all the Shiites within their territories. When sometime later the Zirite ruler openly sided against the Fatimid dynasty by acknowledging the Abbasid caliph, a ministry from the Fatimid court suggested sending against Ifrīqiya the Arabs from the Banū Ḥilāl and Banū Sulaim tribes, originally from the Arabic peninsula and at that time settled in Upper Egypt. According to the tradition, the Fatimid caliph gave each of them a camel and a *dīnār* and ordered them to cross the Nile by saying: "I give you the Maghreb." The Banū Ḥilāl and Banū Sulaim tribes crossed the Nile, devastated and occupied Cyrenaica. Eventually the Banū Ḥilāl, like locusts, as Ibn Ḫaldūn describes them, moved on to Ifrīqiya and defeated the Zirite Berbers near Qayrawān. The Banū Ḥilāl invasion, which caused a renomadization whose negative effects lasted for centuries, initiated a dense epic tradition, not yet entirely studied: among its protagonists, we find Ḫalīfa al-Zenātī, the Berber hero who contrasted the Ḥilāl raids.

New ethnic groups and new dynasties: Turks, Kurds, Ayyubids, and Mamluks (12th–16th centuries)

In Egypt, the last period of the Fatimid caliphate was marked by internal struggles and by an economic crisis. In such a context, the Fatimid rulers sought support from the Seljuk Turks who managed to become the real masters of the Egyptian capital and even to occupy a great part of Syria. The Fatimids tried in vain to regain control of the situation, but their weakness convinced the Christian crusaders they could conquer Egypt easily. For this reason, the Fatimid caliph first appealed for protection to the Zengid ruler of Damascus Nūr al-Dīn (of Turkish origin) and then started secret negotiations with the crusaders. This is why Nūr al-Dīn's lieutenant, the Kurdish Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn b. Ayyūb (the famous Saladin), at the head of a multiethnic army formed by Arabs, Turks, Berbers, and Nubians, abolished the Fatimid caliphate (1171) and brought Egypt under the formal authority of the Abbasid caliphate. Egypt was therefore returned within the Sunni tradition. However, Saladin's sons surrounded themselves with mercenaries from central Asia and Turkish and Caucasian slaves in charge of their personal guard (*mamlūk*). The Mamluks became more and more influential, and around the mid-13th century they founded a new dynasty, destined to rule successfully over Egypt and Syria until the beginning of the 15th century.

Return to Maghreb: the Moriscos

Immediately after the fall of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada (1492), which represented the last Islamic stronghold in the Iberian peninsula, the Christian conquerors faced the problem of the Moriscos, those Muslims who had decided to remain in Spain under the new masters. As early as the beginning of the 16th century, the Moriscos promoted numerous revolts leading to a veritable war (1567–1570, the "Second War of Granada"), during which they went as far as appealing for help to the Ottoman empire, at that time the greatest enemy of the Christian world. This situation led Philip III (king of Spain, r.1598–1621) to order the expulsion from his territory of the entire Muslim population (1609). Over 300,000 Muslims left for the Maghreb and for the Ottoman territories. As a consequence of the Moriscos' expulsion, Spain faced a long-lasting agricultural crisis caused by the sudden shortage of farmers, which was, however, alleviated by the great quantities of gold and silver arriving from the New World.

Iberian peninsula (Al-Andalus)

From the conquest to the fall of the Cordoba caliphate

After the whole Maghreb was brought under the sway of the Umayyad caliphs, and with the end of the Visigothic kingdom, almost the whole Iberian peninsula came under Muslim control in the years from 711 to 714. Ṭāriq b. Ziyād, governor of Tangier and Ceuta, and later Mūsā b. Nuṣayr, governor of Ifrīqiya, were the military leaders. While the first was a convert to Islam and supported mainly by Berber mercenaries, the second was subject to Arab client structures and assisted mainly by Arab mercenaries. Under later governors of Al-Andalus, several advances over the Pyrenees were undertaken and continued after the battle of Poitiers (Tours) (732), leading to almost 40 years of persistent occupation of Septimania (southwest France). The fact that the distribution of the occupied territories between Arabs (mainly in the south) and Berbers (mainly in the north) was full of conflicts suggests that most of the colonists came from among the mercenaries. The new Berber settlers seem to have been more numerous than the Arabs who are estimated at about "several thousand." Furthermore, we may assume that the military units consisted of warriors of the same clan. Though it is unclear if relatives and clients came along with the baggage train or if they followed them as soon as possible, the newly conquered territories were settled by whole clans. The same can be assumed for later contingents.

There were different conflicts within Al-Andalus: struggles between Arab and Berber tribes, hostility between the enemy clans of

Yemenis and north Arabs (Qays), which radiated from the centre of the caliphate to the provinces, and conflicts between old and new Muslim settlers, especially following the arrival of Arab soldiers from Syria after 741. The Umayyad ʾAbd al-Rahmān I (r.756–788), in flight from Damascus, used these conflicts in order to establish an independent emirate in the Iberian peninsula, with Cordoba as capital. As well as Yemeni groups, there were about five hundred Syrian clients (also Qays) to support this assumption of power, the descendants of whom would hold important military and political offices in the emirate (and later caliphate). At first, Berbers were integrated in the new apparatus of government to a minor degree.

As the number of garrisons stationed in the emirate was not sufficient to assert the authority of the new Umayyad dynasty throughout Al-Andalus, and as there were rebellions by different tribes and clans, border regions could not be controlled effectively, making further expansion impossible. After the capture of Barcelona in 801 by King Louis "the Pious" (r.781–840, emperor from 813), the territorial borders of Al-Andalus did not change much for the next three centuries: two thirds of the peninsula was occupied by the Muslims, while one third in the north remained Christian.

In order to eliminate the rebellious Muslims in the north of Al-Andalus, the emir relied on converts from Christian noble families. However, due to numerous conflicts, the emirate fell apart into autonomous regions after the 870s. Only ʿAbd al-Rahmān III (912–961) succeeded in reinforcing Umayyad control, and in 929 he proclaimed himself caliph. As well as Arabs, Berbers, and converts, more and more European slaves (*ṣaqāliba*) entered into important military offices. The caliphate of Cordoba reached its political apogee around the year 1000, when it dominated the Iberian peninsula and the western Maghreb after the Fatimids had retired from there in the course of the 10th century. To control the Mediterranean Sea, the caliphs employed Andalusian Berbers. From 1016 to 1031, the Berberized Hammūdid dynasty replaced the Umayyads as the central power in the Iberian peninsula. During the first decades of the 11th century, the collapse of the caliphate of Cordoba gave rise to the Taifas (*ṭaʾifa*), tiny Berber and Arab kingdoms and principalities. From the middle of the 11th century onward, the "Reconquista" initiated a new phase in the relationship between Christians and Muslims, so that the rulers of Seville, Granada, and Badajoz felt constrained to ask for help from the Almoravids of the western Maghreb.

Although the majority of the Iberian population was of Hispanic-Visigothic origin, not only indigenous Christian elites, but also the broader populace seem to have adapted Muslim language and culture, at least after the establishment of the Cordoba emirate. The same applies to converts (*muladies* = *muwalladūn*) and Christian "Mozarabs" (*mustʿarib*). Estimates according to which around the year 900 two-thirds of the population were still Christian, while during the 10th century 50 percent and in the 11th century 80 percent of Andalusian Christians converted to Islam (Bulliet 1979: 116), are methodologically arguable.

Even very early on, the process of "Arabization" is perceptible on the basis of coin discoveries (from 720 with only Arabic inscriptions) and of administrative political reforms. The persistent importance of clan structures among Arabs and Berbers in Al-Andalus until the late 11th century speaks against the thesis that Muslim settlers were simply absorbed by the local population. Despite conversions to Islam, a considerable part of the Christian and Jewish inhabitants lived as *ḏimmī* under the authority of local powers.

Almoravids and Almohads: the great Berber-Muslim dynasties (11th–13th centuries)

After the mid-11th century, the Maghreb and Muslim Spain were hit by the consequences of a large-scale movement of Muslim Berbers. This eventually gave origin to two consecutive dynasties: the Almoravidi (*al-Murābiṭūn*: the "fighting monks") and the Almohads

(al-*Muwaḥidūn*: the "unitarians") and ended up founding an empire in the westernmost part of the Islamic domains. The first movement originated among the Berbers who were controlling the southern stretch of the caravan route connecting the Mediterranean with the rock salt mines of Taġāza (in present-day southern Algeria) and the gold mines in Ghana. Guided by the strict rule of the mystic ʻAbd Allāh b. Yāsīn al-Ǧazūlī, these Berber tribes strove to refine their Islamic faith, until then quite superficial and inconsistent, while gaining a very strong military emphasis thanks to a severe and rigorous way of life. As early as 1053 the Almoravid movement revealed its great potential by conquering the important caravan center of Siǧilmāsa. In 1061 the confraternity came under the leadership of Yūsuf b. Tāšufīn. He transformed the movement in a powerful war machine, elected Marrakesh as the capital, and took the title of *Amīr al-muslimīn* ("emir of the Muslims"). He also addressed a delegation of Andalusian princes asking to intervene in Spain to block the expansion of the Christian kingdoms in the north. After defeating the Christians at Badajoz, the Almoravids occupied Granada (1090) and Seville (1091).

The four successors of Yūsuf b. Tāšufīn (d.1106) ruled over an empire stretching across two continents. However, their rigor was never particularly appreciated by the sophisticated multiethnic and multi-religious Andalusian society. This substantial incomprehension in the long run generated a deep crisis which was aggravated by the new military efforts of the Christian kingdoms as well as by the rise of a new religious–political movement originating in the Maghreb itself: the Almohads. The founder of this movement, Muḥammad b. ʻAbd Allāh Ibn Tūmart, was a fervid supporter of the principle of the unity of God (*tawḥīd*). Proclaiming himself *Mahdī* ("Messiah"), he promoted a moralization movement and a revival of the orthodoxy which, in his view, had been offended against by the Almoravid regime. Around 1123, the Mahdī proclaimed the holy war against the Almoravids. After Ibn Tūmart's death (1130) his disciple ʻAbd al-Mu'min succeeded in taking Marrakesh (1147). Harshly suppressing any dissent, to preserve the Almohads from possible doctrinal deviations, ʻAbd al-Mu'min extended his control over the Algerian, Tunisian, and Tripolitanian regions and even Al-Andalus.

When in 1163 Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf succeeded ʻAbd al-Mu'min, the Almohad empire extended from the Gulf of Sirte to the Tagus and from Mauretania to the Sahara desert. In this vast domain, the whole of the Almohad tribes stuck to a rigorous policy connoted by hostility to the corrupt Andalusian customs, by manifest anti-Jewish feelings (with the consequent uprooting of the flourishing Jewish communities existing in the Maghreb, which were forced to seek refuge in Sicily and in other regions of the Islamic world) as well as by a strong mistrust of Christianity. After a period of economic, political, and cultural flourishing, the progressing abandonment of Ibn Tūmart's doctrine together with the instability of the tribal basis of the Almohad movement caused a deep crisis which became even more serious because of the uncontrolled inflow of the Zenata Berbers in the fertile plains of Maghreb. Such a crisis was cleverly exploited by the Christian rulers of Spain: King Alfonso VIII of Castile (r.1158–1214) defeated the Almohads near Las Navas de Tolosa (July 1212); Cordoba was lost in 1236 and Seville in 1248. However, the final dissolution of the Almohads did not happen for external reasons: it was rather provoked by the rise of a new Berber dynasty in the Maghreb: the Merinids. In 1275 they conquered Tinmal, the cradle of the Almohads, putting to an end the largest empire ever created by the autochthonous populations of North Africa.

The Merinid dynasty remained in power for about two centuries and was replaced by the Saadians, another great dynasty of Arab origin, which could directly control the main commercial trans-Saharan routes after the conquest of Timbuktu in 1591. However, such routes were by now largely replaced by the sea route which led to the Guinea gulf and most importantly by the Indian route. The Portuguese and Spanish caravels had irremediably defeated the Maghreb caravans.

Fraxinetum (La Garde-Freinet)

The Muslim colony of Fraxinetum (*Ǧabal al-Qilāl*) in southern Provence (Burgundy, France) was founded "privately" by the late 880s and destroyed about 972. The first settlers seem to have been a small group of Muslim "pirates" from Al-Andalus. Often in alliance with local powers and after the 940s subordinated to the Andalusian Umayyad caliph, the inhabitants of Fraxinetum undertook large-scale raids. Thus, as far as today's opinion goes, referring primarily to Ibn Ḥawqal (920–988), Fraxinetum was as much a centre of trade and agriculture as of piracy.

Italy (mainland and Sicily)

7th–11th century (pre-Norman period)

The conquest of Sicily began in 827 at the order of the Aghlabid emir, under the command of the famous jurist Asād b. al-Furāt. From then on this Mediterranean island was in a permanent personal, political, and cultural exchange with Ifrīqiya. The emir's decision to colonize Sicily served not only economic interest (especially the slave trade), but was also a distraction from dissenting and increasingly rebellious local forces in Ifrīqiya. The Muslim penetration of Sicily was less a result of centrally masterminded conquests than an intermittent process that lasted about three generations. There were significant regional variations as well as differences between the character of town and country settlement (Metcalfe 2003: 12). Muslim colonists, who had begun as mercenaries of Arab and Berber origin, came successively over the course of different military advances, but specific figures are unavailable; this applies to family members and other civilians, too. It is assumed that at the beginning of the Norman Conquest a large part of the Sicilian population was Muslim, according to some estimates close to 250,000 persons (Lomax 1996: 177).

Despite a generally increasing "Arabization" and hardly quantifiable conversions to Islam, the rates and times of cultural, religious, and linguistic penetration remain uncertain. In the course of the Muslim conquests some of the island's population doubtless escaped to the mainland, but apart from a few individuals mentioned in the sources it is far from clear if the general mass of the population followed or not. Furthermore, it is an open question, whether a huge number of the remaining local inhabitants converted to Islam. In those territories which were dominated by Muslims, towards the end of the 10th century Arabic seems to have displaced the local languages: Greek, Italo-Greek dialects, and Latin.

The governors of Sicily were mainly of Arab origin and were under a variably intensive Aghlabid and then Fatimid influence. From 947 until the Norman Conquest, the island was ruled by members of the Arab clan Kalbī. The always latent antagonism between the Arab and Berber inhabitants of Sicily, who settled in relatively self-contained areas, led to great and at times armed conflicts (especially in 886/7, 898/9). Beyond that, the shift from the Aghlabid to the Fatimid rulership in Ifrīqiya in 910 gave rise to intra-Muslim frictions and, even after 130 years of Muslim domination, Christian resistance in some key strongholds had still not been overcome. With the Norman conquests during the late 11th century, the Muslim dominance in Sicily came to an end.

Beginning in the 830s, Sicily had become the starting point for further military activities on the Italian mainland, which in many cases took place with support by local Christian powers and military supplies from Ifrīqiya. Only in Bari were Berber commanders successful in creating a quite independent Muslim dominion from 847 to 871 (after c.863, as an emirate). Taranto and Amantea most probably were not emirates. During the whole period of Muslim rulership in Sicily, shifting military bases were located on the Apennine peninsula, especially in southern regions. With the establishment of Norman power in Italy during the 11th century, the last Muslim outposts on the mainland disappeared. As in the case of Sicily, the Muslim presence lasting more than two hundred years led to manifold cross-cultural interactions like trade contacts, embassies, alliances, conversions, marriage legacies, services of Muslim slaves for Christian patrons, and so

on; but for the mainland they are rarely attested to, and then only in isolated sources.

11th–13th century

Despite immigrations from the Maghreb, due especially to famines, between the late 11th century and the beginning of the 13th century the Muslim population in Sicily decreased by 90 percent through flight to North Africa and Andalusia, conversions to Christianity, and as a result of violent conflicts (Abulafia 1990: 103f., 108f.). A continued Berber presence in the Norman period is supported by anthroponymic evidence. However, Ibn Ḥawqal's remark that most people in Sicily were Berbers (*Barqağāna*) is not supported by other references of this period (Metcalfe 2003: 63). Muslims continued to play an important role not only in agriculture, but also in their service in the Norman army and at the court of the kings of Sicily. Yet, because of severe riots, the Emperor Frederick II (r.1220–1250), beginning in the 1220s, resettled the extant Sicilian Muslims in several places in Apulia and Calabria, principally in largely abandoned territories near Lucera (north Apulia, Capitanata). The number of the forced migrants of Lucera alone is estimated at about 15,000 to 20,000 people (Egidi 1911: 624). That many of them really converted to Christianity (see Lomax 1996: 186f.) is doubtful. The Muslim colony in and near Lucera was dispersed around 1300. Whereas the majority were sold as slaves, even after 1300 a few Muslims and their descendants remained in southern Italy. Sicilian Jews still used Arabic as an everyday language until the 15th century.

The Mediterranean islands

One of the most astonishing aspects of the early Muslim conquests was the speed with which fleets under Muslim command were able to challenge the naval power of the Byzantine empire. The first target of Syria's governor Mu'āwiyah was Cyprus; he sent a naval expedition against the island in 649 and attacked it again in 650 and 654. This chronology is confirmed by a very important Greek inscription at Soli damaged by Mu'āwiyah's raids (Cameron 1996), according to which the Muslims captured 170,000 Cypriots, and the remaining inhabitants were forced to pay an annual tribute in addition to the one already imposed by the Byzantines. After Cyprus, which had a very particular position between the Muslim and the Christian world until it was recaptured by Byzantine forces (965), Mu'āwiyah conquered Rhodes (653) and plundered Crete (674), which was taken by the Muslims only in 827–8 and reconquered by the Byzantines in 961. From the beginning of the 8th century, Sardinia and Corsica were raided by the Muslims in many occasions, but never really conquered.

SEE ALSO: Africa, medieval era migrations: an overview; Mediterranean, medieval era colonizations; Mesopotamian and Persian migrations; Muslim world, medieval era migrations; Reconquista

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